

Firewall

It would be the biggest job of her life so far, maybe her biggest job ever. She'd managed to scrape together a living doing odd jobs that came to her mostly by word of mouth. There had been the transvestite who'd wanted all record of his-her?-former life erased; there'd been the guy with the conglomeration of kiddy porn he wanted to hide from the wife. Granted, she might've let slip to some persons in uniform about that second one, but really, she couldn't let *that* kinda scumbag run around, now could she? Still, she did it all and she did it well. But what she was going to do would top everything she'd done and then some.

She's been told to meet him at a little diner a ten minute walk from her flat, some dinky Korean place with foggy windows emblazoned with bamboo and panda bears. The sound of Korean folk music, panjo, if the rhythm was anything to go by, filtered through crackling speakers set in the corners of the room. Two Korean girls in black mini skirts and over-large button-ups busied the empty tables, ignorings the charming smile of the diner's only customer. Gordon Frey—although she was sure the last name was a fake one—sat sprawled over the flimsy plasticore chair, a battered old cowboy hat pulled over his eyes in a way he must've felt was debonair.

“Don' you gots betta thin's ta be doin' then flirtin' wi' them chickies?” she grumbled, sliding into the chair across from him.

“Jealous, Lyra, darlin'?” She snorted, refusing to give such a preposterous suggestion an answer.

“Aww, now, darlin', don' be hurtin' my feelin's none. I's bringin' ya a job, ain' I?”

“Yous bringin' me a whole lotta nothin, righ' now so why don' you start fillin' ma ears with whatever's it is you thin' is sucha grea' deal.” Gordon leaned forward, hat tipping forward to shadow his eyes.

“I's a mucho importante job I go' for ya. To' secret. See, my clien' nee's you ta hack into Sen-Tech's database.” Lyra almost slumped forward, nails digging into the cheap brown laminate.

“You wan' what?” She had never been more grateful for a chair in her life. Gordon stubbed out his Marlboro menthol in the cheap plastic ashtray the diner provided, the sleeves of his blue button-up pushed to his elbows.

“I wan' you t' hack Sen-Tech's database.”

“Jus' checking. Though' maybe I'd heard wrong.” More like had prayed she'd heard wrong. After all, the man across from her, for all his open smiles, his twinkling green eyes, his boyish charm, had a twisted sense of humor, damn the mercenary in him.

“Look, I'm jus' tryin' t' help out a client. Seems Sen-Tech's go' somethin' inna works an' my client wants ta know wha's the what.”

“And your client can' hack it themselves?”

“More like they want to maintain...a level a' distance.”

“They don't wanna get caught, cha mean.” Lyra was well aware of those kinds of people, the kind that were willing to pay for the job to be done, but wouldn't stick their neck out to help the poor schmuck they'd hired.

“Trus' me, the fee's worth it.”

“Oh?”

“Fi' million terre-credits.” She choked on her mouthful of coffee, feeling the burn of it in her nostrils. Oh yes, definitely worth it.

“Tha' much?”

“Yep. Half for me, half for whoever takes the hacking job.” Lyra leaned back in her chair, feeling and hearing the whoosh of the blue plastic back.

“So wha's the deal? Who's ze one payin' up? Gottsa be pretty damn rich to be able to fork over tha' kin' a cash.” Gordon twirled a fresh cigarette with the air of a magician, as if it would disappear into thin air any moment. The air of mystery was enhanced by the hat that hid his eyes, leaving one unable to find answers in their gleam.

“Can't say. Secrecy, 'member? Don' wan' to risk you caving if you get caught.”

“Wha' they lookin' for? Wha' do they 'spect me ta fin'?” Lyra asked, swallowing the last stone cold drop of coffee.

“Tha', my darlin', is for you ta fin' out.”

She settled herself in a secluded corner of the park. It had taken about three buses and two cabs for her to get far enough away from the Melting Pot to feel comfortable. If she was going to hack a big corporation like Sen-Tech, a company that specialized in computer technology, she was *not* going to do it in her backyard. She climbed up into the branches of a birch tree, disturbing the flock of steel and wire birds perched among the yellowing leaves. They fled from the boughs in a flurry of shining metal wings, a sleek machine replica of animals long killed by the PS7 plague some fifty years ago. She settled herself in the spot

they'd abandoned, hidden by the leaves that had yet to fall even this deep into autumn. From the battered bag that always hung on her shoulder, she drew her screen glasses and folding keyboard, linked together with a thin cord, the black rubber hiding an intricacy of wires. Lyra fixed the glasses over her gray eyes, lashes brushing against the thin plastic as numbers and letters flooded the lenses as her computer booted up. She settled the keyboard on her lap, balancing it precariously on her jean-clad thighs as her fingers tapped out her security code.

Despite the snapping chill of autumn that had forced her into the faded trenchcoat, she felt a trickle of sweat work its way between her shoulders and down her spine. This was it. Her moment of truth. If she fucked this up, she'd probably never get another chance. Hell, she'd probably end up arrested. The thought of being stuck in a jail made her hesitate, if only for a minute, before she firmly set her fingers atop the necessary keys. Two and a half million terre-credits. A way out of the Melting Pot. She lifted the first finger and attacked the first firewall.

She'd made it through levels A through C and was in the middle of cracking security level D. It had taken her three hours to make it this far—her longest job had been half that. None of her other jobs, however, had given her the tummy-tight, tingle in her toes feeling this one was. None of *those* had been a challenge. None of them had involved decrypting one of the most complex security systems this side of the western hemisphere. She smiled to herself as she finished her jaunt through level D, moving through level E at a slower pace than the previous four. The words 'Level F' flashed across her screen glasses in bright red, white numbers moving rapidly behind them. Her fingers moved quickly as she employed every tool she had to cracking the code.

“Damn, what kin' o' sysem they got here?” she ground out from between clenched teeth, fingers aching from their constant, repetitive movement. She had done some preliminary research on the company and knew that Level F and up was the high-security levels, but damn, she hadn't expected anything like this. Every inch she gained, the system took two back. This was more important than money, this was her pride on the line, damn it! Her fingers quickened in pace, blurring as they moved over the keyboard, the keys clacking a rapid melody. Those inches she'd lost, she gained back, moving between, through, around the fire walls like the expert she was. With a cackle of pride, she broke the last lock, watching as the precious information streamed across her view. She felt her smirk of triumph slide away, as drawings, diagrams, records of things she barely understood moved before her eyes. She was a computer geek mostly, but even *she* was able to make some sense of the various jargons that filled the records. *What the hell?* She sat there amongst the shivering leaves of the birch tree, filled with a chill despite the sun and her trench coat. Only her expertise, her

quick reflexes managed to save her as bright green letters splayed across her screen.

“Intruder detected. Engaging program S77 now.”

Holy shit. Mierda. Cojese. This person, this thing...Lyra went on auto-pilot, blocking the trace as she skedaddled out, dragging along what little she had found. She'd heard the rumors some months back, about kids that went missing from the streets of the Melting Pot and never came back. Everyone said they were being kidnapped for some crazy kind of experiment but no one said what. Well, she sure knew now.

“Gordon, you hijo de perra, answer your damn phone. We need to talk *now*.”

She sat tapping the worn toes of her combat boots at the same table he'd made the offer. She had thrown her thick brown hair into a ponytail, to better display her annoyance. Her displeasure. Her out and out *rage*. Had he known about what she would find? Had the *client*? Because if they had, if they had had even a *shred* of suspicion...

“Who spit in ya coffee, princess?” Gordon asked as he slid into the chair across from her, balancing carefully on the wobbling legs.

“Spit in my coffee? Well, tha'd be you, Gordon, you jot daegari!” Gordon paused, the flame of his lighter hovering a scant centimeter from the end of his cigarette

“Lyra, nina, wha' are you talkin' 'bout?” Lyra leaned forward, gray eyes a startling shade of blue.

“I'm *talkin'*, chorro, abou' the fact that I was almos' tracked down by a computer. A computer in a *human body*,” she snarled. Gordon dropped his lighter, the flame petering out as he stared at her, green eyes wide behind the red-brown bangs pressed flat by his watch cap.

“What?”

Gordon was on his fourth cigarette in fifteen minutes. In the two years she'd known him, he'd never been a heavy smoker, averaging three to five cigs a day. She couldn't blame him—the whole mess had forced her to bum her first ever cig.

“You're serious.”

“Nah the kin' a thin' you joke about,” she replied, smoking the filter.

“No, guess not.”

“You really didn't know?”

“Nope. Swear on mi madre's grave.”

“You killed ya ma.”

“sides the point.” Lyra stubbed out the cigarette, raising her hand for another cup of coffee.

“Anyways, did ya manage ta finish the job?” Lyra glared at him from over her mug.

“Are you kidding? I was just able to get mi culo out of there. I was able to snag a couple of things but I don't know how much i's gonna be worth and I was lucky ta ge' even tha'.” Gordon crumpled the empty cigarette pack in one fist.

“I can talk ta the clien', but...they may cut the fee on acounta the job no' bein' done.” Lyra slammed her mug down, hot coffee spilling over the sides to singe her fingers.

“Now you listen to me, you bastardo. I finished the job and you can tell those hijos de burros that I want the cut I was promised.” Gordon flinched at the harshness of her voice, flinched again at the wary eyes of the two young Korean waitresses.

“Look, chica, I'll do wha' I can. Ya know that. But i's gonna be hard to deman' a fee we don' really deserve.” Lyra stood up from her seat, slamming five terre-credits on the scuffed surface of the table.

“Call me when you have my fee.” She didn't look back, not even to glare at the gossiping waitresses, as she stomped out the door into the grungy city rain.

She'd never been so happy to see her apartment. It wasn't really anything special—a one room studio with her futon shoved in one corner and her bathtub hidden by sheets rigged to the wall with nails. Through the broken windows covered with duct tape and plastic wrap, she could hear the ringing of bike bells, the roar of the beaten-up taxis that passed through and rarely stopped after sundown, the mish-mash of languages ranging from Spanish to Korean to the occasional expletive in Serbian. It was no penthouse in Lincoln Square, but it wasn't half bad. She shucked off her trench coat and boots, not bothering to change out of her faded jeans or T-shirt stained with the remnants of last night's Thai. 'Stupid Gordon. Stupid job. Stupid client.' This mantra played in her head as she moved through the motions of making ramen, grateful her stove held out long enough to complete the task.

Kids. Little kids turned into computers. It sounded impossible, should've been impossible, but whether or not she wanted to admit it, what had tried to trace her had been exactly that. Dumping the ramen into a stained plastic bowl, she curled up on her beanbag chair, patched together with tape.

“Stupid Gordon. Not checkin' ou' the damn cusomer, didn' his ma teach 'im betta?” she mumbled to herself between mouthful of noodles and broth. The diagrams of brains, notes scrawled out in shorthand beside them, the pictures of ragged street kids they'd picked up from the alleyways of the Melting Pot. Kids whose parents wouldn't look for them, kids who might not have had parents at all. Lyra set the bowl beside her feet, pulling her knees tight to her chest as she shivered, feeling as if the walls of her flat were the steel bars of a cage.

She woke up to heavy knocking on her door, the force of it rattling the hinges. Her

brain jolted into awareness as she slid her pocket knife from beneath her pillow. Lyra moved across the floor slowly, putting as little pressure on the creaking floorboards as she could. Keeping the knife hidden behind her back, she opened the door, peeking around the crack.

“Buenos, nina! Di' I wake ya?” Gordon greeted, standing on her doorstep in faded jeans, battered boots, and baseball cap.

“What the hell are you doing here, you estúpido perro?” she snapped, shoving the knife into the waist band of her blue plaid boxers. He held up a wad of cash tied together with a pink rubber band.

“Here ta drop yer fee. They argued the job wadn' finished but...I haggled a bit and got 'em to pay fity thousan' fors us ta split,” he explained, handing her the stack of bills.

“Guess I' coul' be worse. Leas' they paid,” she said with a resigned grumble, counting out the bills with quick fingers. Gordon watched her with eyes shadowed by the bill of his ball cap.

“Lyra, you okay, darlin'?” Lyra calmly counted and recounted the bills, unwilling to meet his green gaze.

“Lyra.”

“Define ‘okay’.” She leaned heavily on the door frame, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Look, darlin'...if I'da known...”

“Not yer faul'. You didn' know shi' more than me. Jus'...if I was gonna go into a job li'e tha'...”

“You'd wan' some warnin',” he finished, all too familiar with her loathing of going in unprepared.

“Yeah.” She blew her tangled mess of brown hair out of her eyes, feeling as if every muscle was tied with elasti-cord. Gordon pulled off his cap, giving her a little bow as he held out an arm.

“Come on, princess. Why don' I take you out for breakfast?”

Lyra sat nestled in the beanbag chair, a blue and white afghan thrown over her bare legs. She'd been hesitant to take Gordon up on his offer. All she'd really wanted to do when he'd waltzed onto her doorstep was curl up in a ball and try to forget the job had ever happened. She had to admit, though, walking down the crowded streets of the Melting Pot, breathing in the scents of ginger, sage, persimmon, her ears assaulted by the mixes of dialects and accents, she'd been able to forget, if only for a little while. She'd been able to remember all the things she loved about the Melting Pot, drawing comfort from the sight of two Chinese women haggling with a gap-toothed Spanish man over the price of oranges, each holding a child by the back of their shirt. She had thanked him in her own gruff way, kicking at the cracked sidewalk with the toe of her boot. Gordon had given her a crooked

smile, ruffling her messy brown hair before walking away, telling her next time, breakfast was on her. Now she sat in her studio, focused on making sure her system was safe, that *she* was safe. She ran her spyware, her malware, checked through every file to make sure nothing had been tampered with, the hard knot in her gut loosening when she finished.

“Paranoid. I'm jus' bein' paranoid, s'all,” she told herself, pushing her hair away from her plastic-covered eyes. She lifted her hands, fingers settled on her earpieces of her glasses when bright green letters flooded her vision.

“Hello.”

She felt her heart jump up from her toes, hands shaking over her foldable keyboard as the words appeared across her screen-glasses. Fuck. Mierda. How? She'd covered her tracks, hadn't she? Hadn't she?

“Don't be afraid. I don't mean any harm.” No harm. Yeah, right.

“It's been a long time since I talked to anyone. You're the first in...” Lyra waited a few minutes to see if it would finish, wondering if it was possible this...whatever it was had really forgotten how long it had been.

“Do you have a mic?” Lyra hesitated, eyes moving to the front pocket of her bag. She had one—she'd stolen it about three months after she'd stolen her computer from some hotshot from Lilydale who thought he was tough enough to play in her backyard.

Yeah, I got a mic.

“If you want, I have another way of communicating. Please?” She really shouldn't and she knew it. But she couldn't deny that she was a little curious, even if it was a slightly morbid curiosity. She fumbled with one hand for her mic, the other keeping the keyboard stable as her body twisted. Removing the small mic from its zipper pocket, she jacked the arm into the port near her temple, adjusting it to a comfortable position. She put in her ear phones, pressing the tiny 'on' button that activated the wireless transmitter.

“Testing. Can ya hear me?” She waited, unsure of whether it was with dread or anticipation.

“Yes, I can hear you,” a soft voice tinkled in her ear, a tinny, staticy sound that didn't sound human.

“Well, nice to meet you, I guess...” There was a sound that was half crinkle sound, half static.

“Just a second. I should be able to meet you properly.” Lyra wondered what she meant about “meeting properly” before static floated before her eyes.

“Wha' the hell?”

“I'm sorry, just a second.” The static and fuzz vanished, only to be replaced by the hazy image of a child in a long white smock. The girl couldn't have been more than eleven, a scrawny twig of a girl just on the verge of her growth spurt. Her hair was a mess of

dishwater blond, caught up in a messy ponytail with hastily cut bangs half-hiding her hazel eyes. There was the lightness in her step and wariness in her eyes that Lyra recognized, had seen everyday walking down the streets of the Melting Pot.

“You’re Lyra?” the girl asked, her voice a light soprano at odds with the oddly mechanical tone of her voice. Lyra shuffled, wondering if it was possible for the girl to see her in her oversize Harley T-shirt and grease-stained cutoffs.

“Yeah. You?” The girl held out a hand she knew Lyra couldn’t take, a hesitant expression on her face.

“I’m Tana. Tana Dax.” Lyra felt a jolt of surprise. Not many people from the Melting Pot handed out their names so casually, if only to avoid detection from police. That this girl had offered it willingly...

“Nice ta meetcha,” she replied, smoothing her hair away from the mouthpiece.

“Likewise,” the girl—Tana—said.

“Didn’ spect ya ta be so young,” Lyra stated. Tana gave her a soft smile, her fingers plucking at the crisp white smock hanging from her bony shoulders.

“Well...technically, I would be seventeen by now but...whatever it is they do to us...it has stopped our bodies from growing.” Lyra felt as if she’d been rammed in the stomach with a steel pipe, grateful the girl couldn’t see the utter horror on her face. Seventeen, a whole two years older than her.

“Wha’ the hell di’ they do?” Lyra choked out.

“I don’t understand the exact science of it. But they...made us...cyborgs? That’s the best way I can put it.”

“How many of ya are there?” Tana tilted her head, hazel eyes a little blurry as she thought.

“There were more when I first came. But many of them died. They could not adjust.”

“And now?”

“Seven. There are seven others, and I make eight.” Lyra wished she had something more than a beanbag, unable to fall back against the support of a chair.

“I was one of the last ones. Two more came after me and twelve before me.”

“How long? How long ya been there?”

“How long?” Tana clutched her smock in her fists, the bone pressed up tight against paper thin flesh.

“Yeah. How many years, I mean?”

“Time is...not always clear to me. It has been...six years, I think. Six, that’s right.”

“That’s a long time.” Tana gave a shrug, the shoulder of her smock slipping down her bony arm.

“It does not feel so long for me.”

“And...well, I guess no one ever looked for ya, huh?”

“My parents...they died when I was very small. Of measles, I think.”

“You're from the Meltin' Pot, right? All the records said so, but ya don' soun' it.”

“I am so used to the way the doctors talk, I stopped talking that way.”

“I see...”

“I miss it. Funny. I didn't know I missed my accent til now, hearing you talk.”

Lyra bit the inside of her cheek, thinking just how awful it must feel to realize you missed something so small.

“So why did you take the job?” Tana sat cross-legged, smock pulled demurely over her knees.

“Needed the money. Bad. I usually do all right, but money li'e tha', you don' ma'e tha' kin'a money here.”

“At least, not legally.”

“Nope. So's I figured, migh' as well ta'e the ris'.”

“Even though you might be caught.”

“Yep. Long's I' pu's food i' my gu' an' a roof o'er ma hea', ain' really picky bou' wha' needs be done.”

“Still, hacking such a powerful company as Sen-Tech--”

“Look i's either do wha' I do or sell myself to the neares' brothel. An' ain' no ways I's gonna be resortin' ta that ifs I don' gotta. Brothel's wha' killed my ma.” Tana played with the expertly-sewn hem of her smock, dishwater hair tightly pinned back.

“Killed your mother?”

“Some kin'a disease she got tumblin' one gaejisak or 'nother. She made me swears I woul' ne'er take a job tumblin'.” Tana pulled her knees up to her chest, smock hem now pressed against her ankles.

“You're lucky, to remember your ma. I don't remember mine.”

“So you came from th' Meltin' Pot. Same wi' the others, righ'?”

“Yes, although they were all much younger than me when I was brought.”

“How much younger?”

“The next oldest is...Kally, I think, as she was eight when she was brought.” Lyra choked on her bottled water, feeling it splash down the front of her Chicago Cubs sweatshirt.

“Eight? Seriously?”

“The doctors said that children's brains responded best to the procedure because

they have not fully developed. The youngest of us is four.” Lyra set her water on the floor, feeling it churn in her stomach.

“Four. We talkin' four, right?”

“Uh-huh.” Lyra leaned against the wall, shoulders propped up the the corners where she'd pushed her beanbag.

“A four year old kid. Gah daym. They just picked her right up, huh?” Tana nodded, her hair swishing around her skinny shoulders.

“It was different with me. They approached me one day in late fall, offered me a home, an education. I had never gone to school before and wanted to so badly. It sounded like such a great opportunity.” Tana bunched her hands into fists, what Lyra had marked as a habit.

“I was so stupid. I had spent all my life in the Melting Pot, I shoulda known betta! But theres I went actin' li'e some gah daym fool.” Tears had welled up in the girl's eyes, tears her physical body couldn't cry. Lyra wondered if she realized she had slipped into the rough, uncultured speech of the Melting Pot.

“And all for wha'? Ta be stuck inna body ova ki', bein' someun's tool? I'da rather died inna Meltin' Pot gutta!”

The next time she saw Tana, the girl had traded her smock for a pair of loose black pants and a long sweater, her hair held up with a cheap pair of hair sticks.

“Wow, now tha's a new look.” Tana shifted shyly, turning one way and another to show herself off.

“I always wore my hair up in hair sticks. I got them from this little Korean woman...I can't remember her name anymore but she always smelled of incense.”

“I never bought nothin' fancy li'e tha'. I jus' throw it all back inna ponytail.”

“I always loved the pretty things. My hair sticks, perfume...My favorite used to be lily but lily was very expensive so I usually wore jasmine instead.”

“You musta made some good money ta be able ta 'fford things li'e tha',” Lyra said, used to the cheap barsoap she bought from Jing-Mai on the corner of Green and Daniels. Tana shifted uneasily, head ducking down so low that had her hair not been pulled back, it would've hidden her face.

“Before they took me, I used to work at the Dollhouse. You know the Dollhouse?” Lyra felt her mouth move into a snarl. Everyone from the Melting Pot knew the Dollhouse and not for any good reasons. It wasn't the only brothel in the Melting Pot, but it was the only one to offer little girls, mostly orphans whose parents had died in this shoot-out or from that illness. Considering where she'd come from, Lyra didn't blame her for taking those men up on the deal.

“I hated being there but my ma died of illness and I didn' know my pa so I had nowhere else to go. I always wished I could just...fly away,” she recounted, a wistfulness in her hazel eyes.

“Fly?”

“Uh-huh. Like birds. The real kind. With a great, big pair of wings.” It was the silly kind of wish she'd heard from little kids running around the empty lots that served as playgrounds, hoping for something other than the slums of the Melting Pot.

Lyra rinsed the shampoo out of her hair, grateful that Mikael has finally gotten around to fixing the hot water. Even more grateful that she'd managed to snag the shower with the best water pressure—even the busted showers were a hot commodity in her complex, made the more precious by being part of a communal bath. After the week she'd had, this was exactly what she needed, a real shower, not the stone cold bath she was usually forced to resort to. As the soap spun down the drain, she felt a portion of her anxiety swirl away with it—not all, but enough of it to relax the tense muscles of her neck. Hot water, thank somebody for hot water. She stepped out of the shower wrapped in her towel, brown hair damply clinging against her back.

“Abou' time. 'Ja use all the damn wata?” Jasa asked, glaring at her with powder blue eyes that only added to her pixie-faced look.

“Iffin I did, what ya plan ta do ta me?” Lyra shot back, pulling her robe over her towel and tying it tight. Jasa gave a flippant toss of blond hair Lyra knew she touched up on every two weeks, stepping into the shower with a huff.

“Putu,” Lyra murmured as the shower roared on. She moved up the winding stairs, swearing outloud as she tripped over Miss Juniper's toy poodle, wondering what the hell the pink-collared menace was doing on its own. She slid her key in the lock, nudging her door open with a shoulder as she balanced shampoo bottle and washcloth in one arm. The day was abnormally warm for autumn in Chicago and she had taken advantage of that fact, pulling down the plastic to let the warm air in. The voices that were minutely muffled by the barrier thundered even louder, so mixed up that she couldn't pick out language or accent or even the things being talked about. She wondered if Tana ever dreamed about it, ever remembered the smell of fresh persimmons or the symphony of voices that painted a bright portrait of jewel tones and whimsical strokes to match the pristine, steel beauty she'd longed for.

“Wait a minu'e, le' me ge' this straigh'. You been talkin' ta this ki', actually talkin', knowin' she migh' serves you up on a plate.” Lyra sipped her green tea, something Tana had once spoken of with fondness.

“And you been doin' this fer the pas' two wee's.”

“Yep.”

“Lyra darlin', you rockin'? Tha's the dumbes' thing you e'er done, includin' tha' time wi' that loco cochino out behin' the Gray Goose.”

“Now, tha' weren' my faul'. Tha' malakas was drunker 'an dirt and refusin' ta pay ma fee. He deserved that kick to the grapes.” Gordon took a swig of his coffee, dosed with a splash of some strong liquor.

“Nows suppose I can' argue wi' tha'. But besides 'e poin'. Whatchu thinkin', talking ta this lil chickie?” Lyra set her chin on the tops of her hands, remembering hazel eyes peeking through wispy bangs.

“Guessin' she looked kin'a lonely...”

Tana stood before her, in grubby jeans and an oversize hoodie that only seemed to emphasize her gangly, ill-fed frame.

“Lyra? Is something wrong?” Lyra fidgeted in her seat, picking at the loose threads on the right knee of her jeans.

“Hey...you said you'd give anything to leave the lab, right?” Tana eyed her warily, like a half-starved dog that was unsure if it could trust a helping hand.

“Yes...why?” Lyra adjusted her screen-glasses, setting her bare feet on the rough wood floor of her flat.

“Because...I might know a way to make that happen.”

Lyra reached out from beneath her covers to slap her alarm clock, groaning as the holographic numbers 8:30 glared at her in bright red. If it weren't for her meeting with Gordon—not to mention the promise of coffee made from *actual coffee beans*—she would've just rolled over and gone back to bed. Instead she clumsily dragged herself from the warmth of the covers, shivering in the chill that had made its way past the tape and plastic wrap. She threw on a pair of black cargoes and a Hello Kitty T-shirt, grabbing the nearest elastic to throw her hair into a bun. On with the trench coat and the trusty old boots and she was out the door, snagging a ride on Tony from downstairs' bike.

“Gratze, Tony. I owe ya,” she called as he sped down the road, narrowly missing one of the who-knew-how-many street vendors. She entered the small restaurant, breathing in the rich scent of Ukrainian cuisine.

“Annyeong, Lyra darlin',” a voice called out from her left. Lyra turned to find the thirty-year-old freelancer tucked in a corner booth, hat pulled down over his eyes, wrapped in his usual leather jacket.

“Give me some coffee 'n it will be,” she replied, sliding into the seat across him. He

raised a gloved hand, flagging down a tall, blond waitress in a faded blue dress and apron.

“Get us some coffee, darlin’?” He asked with a suave wink of the eye. The waitress responded not with the annoying titter most waitresses did, but with the sly lifting of her skirt to reveal a Taser-knife holstered on her thigh. Lyra folded her hands in front of her mouth, hiding her smile as the waitress glided through the swinging door to retrieve a mug and coffee.

“Well, now how do ya like tha’? Can’ a guy be frienly no more?” Lyra rolled her eyes at the dramatics as she doctored her coffee with cream and sugar, grateful to be in a place that properly cleaned their mugs.

“So Lyra, nina, what’s cookin’ up in tha’ pretty head o’ yers?” Lyra set down her mug, wrapping her hands so tightly around it she feared she’d crack the china. It was important what she had to talk about. More important than anything.

Today was the day. D-Day. She woke up precisely at eleven, wanting as much sleep as possible. If she was going to pull this off, best to have enough sleep, especially when there was the threat of stress-induced insomnia. She dressed herself in her nicest pair of jeans, layering them over a pair of pink and blue polka dot thermal leggings. Underneath her trench went a heavy black sweater, hanging to her knees, tied around her waist with a daisy-printed scarf she’d snagged from a stall when the owner wasn’t looking. Gathering up her screen-glasses and foldable keyboard, sliding them delicately into their case, she slid on her boots and made her way through the narrow halls of the building.

“Lyra, mija, going out again?” Mrs. Hernandez asked, coming down the stairs with her youngest, Lydia, propped on her hip. Lyra turned with a smile, hitching the bag of her case higher on her shoulder.

“Yeah, got some errands ta run. Been busy lately, tha’s all,” she promised. Mrs. Hernandez nodded, perfectly willing to believe her.

“Well, you just be careful, hija. Bad boys out on them streets,” she warned. Lyra waved in acknowledgment, thinking that bad boys weren’t only found on streets.

It seemed fitting to work from the same place she had when she’d first hacked Sen-Tech. She wedged herself into the branches of the tree, now missing more leaves than they had a week ago. Sliding the screen-glasses over her eyes, she unfolded her keyboard, cradling it in the nest between her crossed legs. There were no mechanical birds huddled on the branches of the tree this time, artificial vocal cords chiming out a monotonous tune. That was fine. She always worked best with silence and this would be her best work ever. Her best work ever for sure.

"I migh' know a way to setcha free bu'..." Lyra halted, wondering how to suggest what amounted to suicide.

***"How?"** Tana leaned forward, a sense of desperation and hope in her eyes. Lyra swallowed, hands curling into fists so tight she could almost feel her short nails punch through skin.*

"Well, technally speakin', you an' the others're all computers, righ'?" Tana's image became fuzzy, as if she were having a hard time projecting her image.

***"I...yeah, in a way o' speakin'. Leas' our brains are."** Lyra folded her hands, feeling the indentation of nail marks in her palms.*

"Followin' tha' logic, you could prolly be hacked an' infected with a virus, sames any other computer." Tana remained silent, small hands twisting the torn edge of her sweatshirt.

"Which means, like any other computer...yer sysem coul' be crashed. Given how complex you are, the fact that your brain's both computer an' brain...there's a good chance they don't have a reboot method for ya." Tana's head rose, slowly, hesitant to get her hopes up.

"I've already worked ou' some o' the details. Granted, this works, and I can't promise it will, you'll bascally be brain dead. Your body'll still be ali' but otherwise..." Tana reached out like she had the first time she'd really seen her, the watery brightness of tears in her eyes.

She was almost to the security levels run by the com-children. Hopefully Tana had told them already, had told them of the freedom she was bringing them. And hopefully she'd done it stealthily. Half her plan was banking on the children's security program not being active. She'd come up with an alternate method, had Tana considered it too risky to trust the other com-children, but Tana had promised her she was not the only one craving release. She moved through security blocks D and E with no problem, the so-called security as effective as the tissue paper those rich schmucks wrapped glass ornaments in. She reached level F, the level where the com-children took over for the obsolete machine. She proceeded with caution, typing out her message in old Morse code, something she'd picked up from her brother before he'd gotten stuck on elixir. She waited, breath caught somewhere between her stomach and her lungs, waiting for Tana's reply. It came, as she'd hoped, as she'd planned.

***"Ready. Do it."** She moved without thought, rapidly punching in the virus code, piece by piece eliminating any possible anti-virus software they'd uploaded into the children. With every keystroke, she moved closer to the end of her plan, moving through the sequence until she'd reached the end of the code, the last press of the key that would end everything.*

Her fingers hovered above the keyboard, frozen in place as she was struck by the enormity of *what the hell she was doing*. This wasn't like the vid-cells or palm-coms she'd crashed any number of times when she was just learning to hack, a relatively harmless bit of fun. With this next stroke of the key, she would effectively be committing mass murder. She would be killing twenty human beings, people like her, who'd been so desperate for escape

from the Melting Pot that they'd agreed before knowing what they were agreeing to. She would be killing a bunch of kids like Tana, kids whose bodies were permanently locked in youth, never aging even a day.

"You sure you can do this, nina?" Gordon sat across from her, gloved fingers carefully cradling his last cig.

"I hafta. Its the only thin' I can do." She had been so sure it was the right thing. Underneath the flickering lights of the diner, with the soft drone of folk music overlapped with the chatter of Ukrainian coming from the kitchen, it had seemed too easy. Gordon put out his cigarette, eyeing her from beneath a fringe of red-brown bangs.

"Then make sure you do your best, chica. Nothin' bu' your best." Nothing but her best. That was what she had promised Gordon that lonely night in the dinner, what she had promised Tana when she had suggested the plan. She hated people who broke promises and if anyone deserved not to have a promise broken, it was Tana. With a firm, decisive slam, she hit the final key, watching as red numbers crawled across her screen-glasses. Her hands began to shake in a way they hadn't since her attempt to hack Sen-Tech, since Tana had stumbled across her and reached out for the first time. Though she knew it wasn't possible, she could almost hear the cries of freedom, of relief, as one by one the virus seared the mechanically-altered brains of the com-children. The last, the very last, was Tana, appearing before her as a flickering image, smiling with gratitude as her fingers waved in goodbye. Despite knowing the girl wouldn't see her, she waved back, hoping Tana had finally gotten those wings she'd wanted so badly.

She stumbled up the stairs half past midnight, legs sore from the hours she'd spent wandering the Melting Pot. With sunset had come the bitter chill of autumn, seeping past the thickness of her trench coat to sink into her marrow. She didn't notice it beyond the haze of shock that had settled with that final press of the key, didn't notice the stomping of feet that shook the walls or the mixture of Spanish and Vietnamese that crept from beneath the doors. It wasn't until she bumped into a heavy frame on her doorstep that the fog lifted.

"Hey, darlin', bou' time ya go' home." Gordon sat there, lanky, broad-shouldered frame pressed against the wall, eyes looking up at her from beneath the rim of that ridiculous cowboy hat. She stood there, curled into her coat, trying her best to stoke some righteous fury.

"Come on, chica, le's ge' you i'side." He fumbled through her coat pockets for her key, one arm around her as he shoved it in the lock and ushered her inside. Her small studio felt even smaller, the stained wooden walls closing in around her, the cacophony of speech making her head throb. Lyra felt a bundle of cloth being pressed into her hands, shaking fingers wrapped tight around it.

“Darlin', I needs ya ta ge' changed, a'right? Lyra?” A hand went to her shoulder, a hard, heavy weight, drawing her out of her fugue.

“Turn aroun' firs'. Don' wan' you thinkin' yous getting' some free show,” she ordered, her voice not shaking an inch. Gordon gave her a salacious wink as he turned around, hand behind his back. She shucked off her clothes, throwing on the baggy blue yoga pants and loose white T-shirt, eerily similar to the first normal outfit she had ever seen Tana in. As she tugged the ponytail holder from her hair, she swore to buy hair sticks tomorrow, and lily perfume.

“Finished up 'ere, darlin'?”

“Yeah.” Gordon turned around, hat for once tipped back as he eyed the mess of tired girl.

“Come on, bed. Goo' nigh's sleep'll do ya some goo',” he stated, leading her over to the battered futon in the corner. He pulled aside the Mickey Mouse sheets and Barbie comforter Mrs. Hernandez had given her after her daughter, Magdalena, had grown out of them, letting her crawl underneath their heavy weight. He tucked them tight around her, settling himself against the wall as she buried her face in her pillow and fell asleep to the sounds of the Melting Pot.